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Walden O'Dell of Diebold Election Systems demonstrated for Secretary of State **Cathy Cox** (right) and others the touch-screen voting devices his company will install statewide.

High-tech voting equipment slated for November elections

Continued from H1

State Thelwell Sligmon.

Diebold's voting machine allows voters to cast a ballot by inserting their finger into a slot, similar to a bank ATM. The voting machine will not allow a person to vote for two candidates in a single race, and a confirmation screen will allow a voter to double-check the ballot before it is cast.

Diebold's system will allow blind voters to cast ballots without an escort, giving them the same secret ballot as sighted voters. The system is expected to speed up election night returns as well.

Now that a contract is signed, Diebold and election officials have six months to change all of the state's approximately 2,000 precincts from punch card, lever, paper and optical-scan balloting systems to the new touch-screen machines. The deadline has some county elections officials nervous.

"We are a little anxious about it, but they say they can do it," said Gloria Champion, Fulton County's election superintendent.

"We'll have to work 24 hours per day," November's general election will include high-profile races for governor and other statewide constitutional offices, the Legislature, one U.S. Senate seat, all of the state's congressional seats, as well as local races.

While Secretary of State Cathy Cox acknowledges there isn't a "rehearsal" yet, she said the state Legislature has provided the resources to get the project done on time at no cost to counties. Lawmakers have given Cox \$4.5 million for voter education and poll worker training.

The \$54 million contract puts much of the burden on Diebold to get the voting machines delivered and set up, and local election officials trained. Cox has the right to pull the plug on the November target date and fine the company if executives miss any of the periodic deadlines set by the contract.

"I think it's infinitely doable," Cox said. "I think the counties that are concerned have no appreciation for how much we will be assisting them."

Diebold beat out eight other bidders, and the deal is likely to bring some criticism.

The firm, politically connected lobbyists include former Secretary of State Lewis Massey — whom Cox worked for when he was in office about four years ago — and Georgia Public Authority Chairman Keith Mason, who was executive secretary to former Gov. Zell Miller.

"I was not contacted on behalf of any of the bidding companies by any of their lobbyists," Cox said.

Cox spent part of a news conference Friday justifying the fact that Diebold was not the lowest bidder. Officials have said all along that the selection would be based as much on a company's track record, equipment design and ability to deliver a system quickly as on cost.

Diebold's bid was recommended unanimously by a committee of 12 officials from Cox's office and other state agencies.

The bidding and selection process were managed by the Georgia Technology Authority.

State-of-the-art elections

A new electronic touch-screen voting system that will be used statewide in the November general election will ensure that every vote is counted accurately, officials say. The state awarded a \$54 million contract to Diebold Election Systems, which will provide 20,000 touch-screen voting units for the state's 2,000 precincts.

Ruling will let dam run turbines

ASSOCIATED PRESS

A U.S. District Court judge on Friday lifted an injunction against running pump-back turbines to produce electricity at the Lake Russell Dam on the Georgia-South Carolina border.

The ruling is the latest step in an environmental legal battle that's gone on since 1988.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which built and runs the dam's hydroelectric plant, said the court agreed that the project met all requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act and should be allowed to operate.

The South Carolina Natural Resources Department and the National Wildlife Federation — along with that group's affiliates in Georgia and South Carolina — said 14 years ago after similar turbines killed thousands of fish at a dam in Missouri.

U.S. District Judge Falcon Hawkins let the state of Georgia join the lawsuit two years ago.

The Corps wants to use the four reversible turbines to pump back water between lakes Russell and Thurmond along the Savannah River and create electricity at night with the water used during the day.

The turbines would kill between 6 million and 12 million fish a year, less than 1 percent of Lake Thurmond's fish population, the Corps had said.

But the plaintiffs said the study was done in one seven-month period. "This period cannot possibly address differing water years and conditions," the plaintiffs wrote in their suit.

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

To cast a ballot, the voter will:

1. Sign in at the precinct and get a voter key card.
2. Insert the key card into a slot to access appropriate ballot.
3. Make a candidate selection by touching the appropriate box on the on-screen ballot.
4. Touch "next" to go to additional races.
5. Review all choices on the final screen.
6. Touch "Cast Ballot" if the choices are correct or return to individual races to make changes.

Votes are stored in the machine to ensure backup. Election officials can also print the ballots cast on each machine as additional backup.

When the polls close, the votes are tabulated at the precinct. They can be sent to election headquarters by modem or delivered by precinct workers.

For voters who are blind or unable to read, the system can provide audio. Voters can use a numerical keypad and headphones to cast a ballot.

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